

# Sheltering.

VULNERABILITY AND DOMINANCE.

*A ceramic work by Joachim Provoost*  
*2019-2020*

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## VULNERABILITY AND DOMINANCE.

1.

Tibetan *dzongs*, or monastery-fortresses, are the architectural image upon which the concept of this ceramic work is based. Not in a formal way, but by distilling the fundamental essence of the image. Abstraction, in this process, is not understood as minimalist reduction, but rather as a condensation of imagery, experience, signification and existential meaning into an experiential singularity.

A Tibetan *dzong* (and obviously also a house and most built forms) is an institution, a cultural phenomenon, not a mere structure determined by the physical setting. A site only provides possibilities, not imperatives, while the cultural matrix determines/limits the choices.<sup>1</sup>

*"Man was a symbol-making animal, before he was a tool-making animal. He reached specialization in myth, religion, and ritual, before he did in material aspects of culture."*<sup>2</sup> The function of *dzongs* thus transcends a mere physical, utilitarian or aesthetic concept. Buildings speak to us, not only of how they should be used, but above all of how they should be lived. *"What works of design and architecture talk to us about is the kind of life that would most appropriately unfold within and around them. They tell us of certain moods that they seek to*

*encourage and sustain in their inhabitants. While keeping us warm and helping us in mechanical ways, they simultaneously hold out an invitation for us to be specific sorts of people."*<sup>3</sup> The essence of architecture is a question of values we want to live by.

The essence of Tibetan *dzongs* will be investigated by means of two oneiric images –1/ the image of the shell, and 2/ the image of a curled up dog– which will form the basis for the conception of the ceramic work.

2.

When looking at the photographs of *dzongs*, perched atop hills in the harshness and desolation of the Tibetan high-altitude plateau, two personal emotions awake:

1/ vulnerability: how vulnerable man must have felt in this landscape to feel the need for building a fortress this size and strength, and walls this thick.

2/ dominance: it was not enough for man just to have a refuge. Through position and arrangement, his structure commands over its context. The lower valley seems to be 'subjected' to it.

3.

Through these two embodied emotions, the primal image of a shell arises. *"An empty shell invites daydreams of refuge."*<sup>4</sup> A shell is not carved from the outside, but formed from within.<sup>5</sup> French poet Paul Valéry, in *Les Coquillages*, touches upon its slow, continuous formation: *"the mollusc exudes its shell, it lets the building material seep though, distils its marvellous covering as needed."*<sup>6</sup> From the mollusc's sensitive flesh to the shell material solidifying around it, the shell confers a purely physical intimacy.

In the setting of the vast and desolate Tibetan landscape one can easily

imagine the slow formation of the monastery-fortress, how the massive stone walls have exuded from the very material they stand on, through continuous, arduous labour by people who have made this place their home, and have built walls around them in search for intimacy.

The shell as a refuge deals with the emotion of vulnerability and withdrawal, while the emotion of dominance gives rise to the shell as an abode. This brings us to the phenomenology of the verb 'to emerge'.<sup>7</sup> Jurgis Baltrusaitis offers us the image of *"a dog that leaps from its shell and pounces upon a rabbit."*<sup>8</sup> There is a sign of violence in the emergence of an over-excited creature from its lifeless shell. *"One degree more of aggressiveness and the shell-dog would attack a man."*<sup>9</sup> In our imagination, *"a creature that hides and withdraws into its shell is preparing a way out. [...] we have the impression that by staying in the motionlessness of its shell, the creature is preparing temporal explosions [...]"*, an outburst.<sup>10</sup> *"The shell incorporates a decisive type of aggressiveness, which is postponed aggressiveness, aggressiveness that abides its time."*<sup>11</sup> This leads Bachelard to say that *"wolves in shells are crueler than stray ones"*.<sup>12</sup>

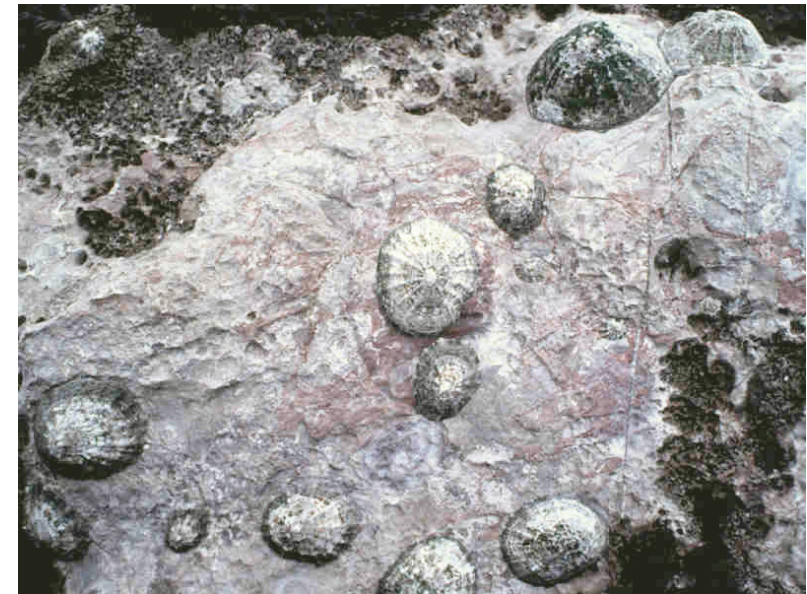
*"Shells have a strong oneirism: the dreamer is seized by convictions of a refuge in which life is concentrated, prepared and transformed."*<sup>13</sup> In the same manner, Buddhist monks seek refuge in these monastery-fortresses, into solitude, meditation and, when enlightened, re-emerge to spread the Buddhist doctrine. Monks in retreat are like wolves in shells. *Dzongs* are centreplaces, condensing religion, culture and knowledge, and radiating it back outwards in their sphere of influence with the metaphorical aggressiveness of a wolf leaping from its shell.

4.

The emotion of vulnerability and the notion of a shell as protection in which a living being is withdrawn into itself, in which life is turning

upon itself, spiralling, coiling, brings us to the image of a curled up dog. *"[...] life begins less by reaching upward, than by turning upon itself."*<sup>14</sup> *"Life is round."*<sup>15</sup>

This is not a geometricians sphere. *"When a geometrician speaks of volumes, he is only dealing with the surfaces that limit them. The geometricians sphere is an empty one, essentially empty."*<sup>16</sup> *"Images of full roundness help us to collect ourselves, permit us to confer an initial constitution on ourselves, and to confirm our being intimately, inside. For when it is experienced from the inside, devoid*



Patella Vulgata; common European limpet.

Photograph by Dr. Keith Hiscock in 'The Marine Life Information Network'.

*of all exterior features, being cannot be otherwise than round.”*<sup>17</sup> The primal image of the warmth and intimacy where life is gathered, where being is concentrated upon itself, is solid roundness. “[...] *everything round invites a caress.*”<sup>18</sup>

For example a foetus in the intimacy of the mother’s womb is curled up, or a bird, not during flight, but in its nest, is “[...] *a centralization of life guarded on every side, enclosed in a live ball, [...]*”.<sup>19</sup>

5.

Roundness is the single most fundamental form of ceramics, and also constitutes the basis for this ceramic work, in order to incorporate the



Dog curled up sleeping.  
*Author unknown.*

notion of life seeking shelter and curling up inside. The interior space is enveloped by gentle curves, facilitating a feeling of intimacy, while the shape of the opening at the top is protective yet inviting. Even in the loneliest landscape, stretching onward endlessly, mental refuge can be found here.

On top of this stands the shell as an abode, protecting/caressing whatever fragile content inside on the one hand, and on the other evoking a commanding expression through its determined, self-confident shape and dominant relationship with the rugged foundations that support it. It does not incorporate the aggressiveness of a wolf in a shell, but nevertheless, more subtly, demands a definite authority.

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#### NOTES

**1** Amos Rapoport, ‘House, Form and Culture’, p. 47 / **2** Mumford Lewis, ‘Art and Technics’, as quoted in Rapoport, op. cit., p. 42 / **3** Alain de Botton, ‘The Architecture of Happiness’, p. 72 / **4** Gaston Bachelard, ‘The Poetics of Space’, p. 107 / **5** Ibid., p. 106 / **6** Paul Valéry, ‘Les Coquillages’, p. 10 / **7** Bachelard, op. cit., p. 109 / **8** Quoted in Bachelard, op. cit., p. 110 / **9** Loc. cit. / **10** Ibid., p. 111 / **11** Ibid., p. 112 / **12** Loc. cit. / **13** Ibid., p. 120 / **14** Ibid., p. 106 / **15** Ibid., p. 232 / **16** Ibid., p. 235 / **17** Ibid., p. 234 / **18** Ibid., p. 236 / **19** Ibid., p. 237



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#### PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

All photographs are taken by the author unless mentioned otherwise.

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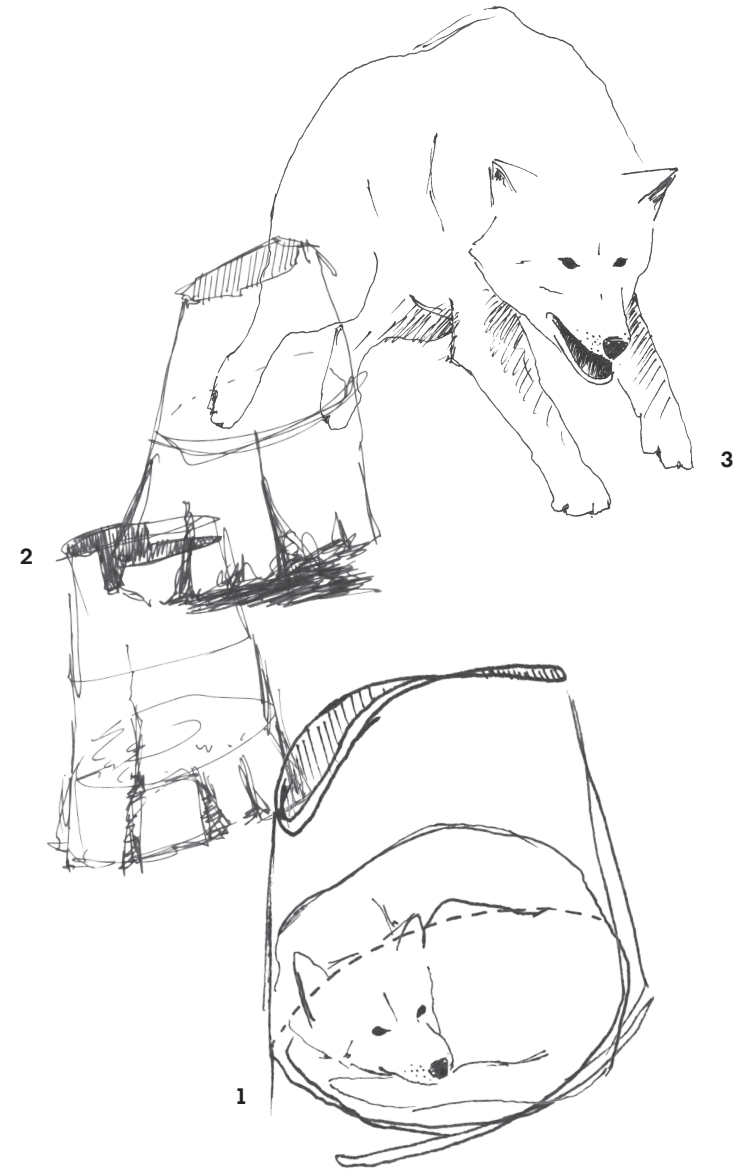
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#### CONCEPTUAL SKETCHES

*Opposite page.*

**1** / Roundness as the leading principle for incorporating the emotion of vulnerability and giving form to the motion of withdrawal and seeking refuge.

**2** / Sketches exploring the relation between shell forms and the rugged 'landscape' that supports them. Externally the form aims convey / authority and dominance, integrating the metaphorical determination with which the wolf leaps from its shell.







Khampa Dzong, Tibet, 1903  
*Photograph by John Claude White.*





Gyantse Dzong, Tibet, 1903  
*Photograph by John Claude White.*











*This page:* exterior texture  
*Opposite:* interior texture

